



HadziMuhamedovic, S. (2018). Articulation as a Political Act? On a Study of Palestinian Shrines: Review of Bones of Contention: Muslim Shrines in Palestine by Andrew Petersen. *Anthropology Book Forum* , 4(1). <http://www.anthropology-news.org/?book-review=articulation-as-a-political-act-on-a-study-of-palestinian-shrines>

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Articulation as a Political Act? On a Study of Palestinian Shrines

Review by Safet HadžiMuhamedović

Bones of Contention: Muslim Shrines in Palestine

By Andrew Petersen

Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

Bones of Contention will be valuable to historians and archaeologists, as much as social scientists, although it does require a particular kind of reading (at times, against its own grain). The introduction does not fully anticipate the arguments to come, and the reader is sometimes left to their own devices in interpreting the predicament of shrines in Palestine. Andrew Petersen considers these shrines through their, often intersected, political, economic, religious and academic histories. The “bones”, however, are mostly implied: the author focuses on shrines as architectural structures related to actual or purported burial sites. The “contention” is, likewise, not dealt with explicitly and requires further analytical unpacking. Firstly, in its sense of disagreement or dispute, “contention” fails to capture the workings of the nationalist violence in Israel and Palestine. The longevous, continued destruction of landscapes (and the shrines therein), the expulsion of communities, and the disintegration of collective memory, do not fit neatly into this rather reserved wording. On the other hand, “contention”, without some qualification, also works to smooth out the differences between historical episodes (so that one might even fall into the trap of reading the book as yet another portrayal of the “Holy Land” with its historically multiple and antagonistic stakeholders).

Petersen opens the book with the difficult task of outlining “shrine” as a concept, and by indicating the historical developments and the contemporary significance of shrines. Muslim shrines in Palestine and the region, he notes, are usually, but not exclusively, burial places (7), which have been variously politically endorsed or resisted during their history. Whether they have been taken as “idolatrous” or as “territorial markers” and proof of “ancient claims to land”, their existence had become a ubiquitous element of Palestinian landscapes, particularly since the twelfth century (7, 10). Petersen

notes several reasons for the increased importance of shrines, from the inclusion of Jerusalem in the Hajj itineraries, the influence of Christian veneration and the Crusades, to the “growth of Sufism as part of mainstream religious life” and the influence of the mausoleums often forming sections of tekkes, the Sufi lodges (9-17).

Petersen considers the historiography on Palestinian Muslim shrines (chapters 2 and 3), which, he argues, had been split between the European and the Muslim production. The accounts of Europeans, who reached the shrines firstly as pilgrims and then as Crusaders, were based on interests that ranged “from curiosity to a deep fascination” (27), but were also “characterized by ignorance, suspicion and often hostility” (28). Petersen’s inclusion of depictions by both Muslim and Christian authors makes for a valuable comparative understanding of the shrines’ historical reception. His examples are compelling: from the seventeenth-century account of a merchant of the English Levant Company, through the visitors scavenging for biblical associations of the region, the scholars looking for signals of “primitive religion” (33) and the “persistence of ancient and universal impulses” (35) in Muslim shrines, to the detailed Orientalist mappings and the academic study of the region after Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1799 and the founding of the Palestine Exploration Society in 1863. Since the 1990s, Petersen notes, the attention to Muslim shrines in the region was renewed, partly due to the focus on their political aspects.

Chapter 4 considers the impact of the Mamluk sultans and officials in the increased visibility and importance of shrines after the Crusades. Petersen looks at three shrines sponsored by the Mamluk sultan Baybars. In chapter 5, Petersen discusses the development of Sufism with attention to the Qadiriyya and the Yashurtiyya tariqas, arguing that the rise of Sufism and its reverence of saints are directly related to the proliferation of shrines, and, likewise, that the reduced importance of shrines followed the decline of Sufism. In chapter 6, Petersen looks at “shaykh’s tombs”, which, despite being the most frequent form of Muslim shrine in Palestine, were seldom documented in historical sources, but are well known to the locals and are the subject of most of the academic literature. In chapter 7, Petersen considers the Shi‘i, Druze and Bahá’í shrines, suggesting that these structures were architecturally indistinguishable from the Sunni shrines. He argues that Israel placed its emphasis on Druze sites in part “as a means of claiming territory within a predominantly Muslim and Christian Galilee” (113). Given that the Israeli law protected sites with built structures, buildings were added to Druze sacred places like trees and springs in order to gain protected status (113). Through this process, Petersen notes, shrines were “converted” to accommodate the political climate (117).

The third section of the book is generally about the “destruction and neglect” of Palestinian shrines in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as about the possibilities of their preservation.

In chapter 8, Petersen notes that: “the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 has resulted in the destruction of some Muslim shrines, the abandonment and neglect of many more and the appropriation of others” (123). He also notes that, “whilst some of the damage to tombs might be a direct result of Israeli actions, it is suggested that a large number of Muslim shrines have suffered because of a decline of Sufism and the growth of fundamentalist Islam” (123). The latter claim is, however, not substantially explored, so the reader is left to wonder about the extent of this “fundamentalist Islamic” impact in Palestine.

Petersen argues that “outright targeted destruction of Muslim shrines appears to be fairly rare and was mostly carried out during the early years of Israeli independence” (124-125). He cites Mordechai Bar-On, a Company Commander of the Israeli Central Command, who said that sacred sites were not destroyed deliberately (125). This quote, I believe, should be read as satirical rather than denotative, as Petersen continues to provide several examples of targeted Israeli destruction. He shows that the destruction of Mashhad Ras Husayn in Ascalon, and other similar shrines, may be understood as part of ethnic cleansing. Although Petersen does not use this term, he does write that the devastation in Ascalon was perpetrated “to encourage the Arab inhabitants of the region to leave the country”, and “because it was a major centre of pilgrimage for the local population and held one of the five major annual festivals” (125). In other words, the state understood the social significance of the places destroyed. Petersen discusses the shrines in Israel and the shrines in the Palestinian Territories separately. For the shrines in Israel, he notes that the ones that were not destroyed, but rather “fell into ruin”, have experienced such a fate “because the local Arab Palestinian population has been dispersed and is no longer in a position to maintain the shrine” (129). He also gives some examples where such shrines are still taken care of, despite expulsions (129-13).

In the Palestinian territories, Petersen writes, shrines are used and maintained, but sometimes, new mosques are built next to, or over the shrines (no examples are provided) (130). Some shrines are officially in the Palestinian Territories but are effectively inaccessible due to Israeli control (131). Finally, Petersen mentions that some Muslim shrines were appropriated, so that “Muslims are either excluded or have very restricted and partial access to particular Holy places” (131).

Looking at contested shrines, Petersen notes briefly the case of Hebron and the division of the mosque and the shrine (132). He also gives the example of Rachel’s tomb (132-134), respected by Christians, Jews and Muslims, which has been surrounded by a six-meter high wall and made into an exclusively Jewish shrine since 2000 (133). Another example of Israeli hegemony is the Nabi Samwil (shrine of Prophet Samuel), where Muslims were likewise excluded from visits to the tomb, despite it being in *de facto* Palestinian Territories (134). Such was the faith of another “multi-confessional” site,

Qabr Yusef (the tomb of Joseph) in Nablus (134-136). In chapter 9, Petersen discusses shrines as heritage sites and the possibilities of their conservation, suggesting: 1) “the documentation and presentation of existing and destroyed shrines on the Internet”; 2) “the use of shrines for the promotion of tourism”; 3) “the preservation of shrines as a form of resistance to extremist interpretations of Islam”, and 4) “the role of shrines in the promotion of interfaith understanding” (141). These suggestions do not consider the capacity of shrines to act as a form of resistance to the occupation of Palestine. Rather, Petersen makes an argument for “virtual preservation”, noting some useful websites and blogs (145-147). The actual preservation, conservation and rehabilitation of shrines is, he notes, “much more complex and expensive” (147). The reconstruction and the “repatriation” of shrines are not considered. As reconstruction is re-entering the heritage vocabulary, it would be apt to evaluate its prospects in Palestine/Israel.

It is not clear whether Petersen endorses the Israeli appropriation of some sites when he notes that “the fabric of the buildings concerned have been maintained and well conserved” (149), “protected from atmospheric pollution” and, by way of a caretaker, “protected from vandalism” (150). The question remains, who is to decide whether these buildings have been maintained, protected and conserved? The state that had violently taken them into its custody? The heritage specialist? Or, is it rather the community to whose cosmology these shrines belong and from whose caretaking these shrines were seized? On the whole, this chapter envisages shrines as documents of the past; their social significance, or their value for sustainable return of the displaced communities, unfortunately, remains unexplored.

In the concluding remarks, Petersen asks how these shrines relate to the expression of Palestinian national identity, although it would be more interesting to understand how they relate to the expression of Israeli nationalism. He notes that, often “the whole landscape lay within the protection of holy places” (154), which, I think, is exactly what makes these places such effective symbols of both belonging and dispossession.

Guided by the book’s subtitle, *Muslim Shrines in Palestine*, I harbored hopes that this manuscript would attempt to unpack the notion of the adjective “Muslim”, as related to Palestinian shrines. Just think of the tomb of Saint George/Khiḍr in al-Ludd, nestled in a Byzantine crypt, within the remains of a twelfth-century Crusader church, below a Greek Orthodox church and the adjoining mosque – a place where being Muslim and Christian is intimately intertwined in practice and belief in the miraculous fertility and healing powers of the green saintly figure (and a place where a synagogue has been more recently erected). The general absence of George/Khiḍr, so important for Palestinian landscapes, is somewhat puzzling.

In the end, Petersen discusses “the future of shrines within the context of global Islam”. He notes

that the threats to these shrines mainly come from the deliberate destruction and neglect (159), although, I would argue, making a clear difference between the two is certainly problematic in Palestine. The exiled communities cannot take care of a shrine (see also Petersen's argument, 161). The author argues that "since the 1990s, there has been a growing awareness of the value of Muslim shrines within the Israeli archaeology and heritage community" (159-160), resulting in the cessation of "deliberate and targeted destruction of Muslim shrines" (160). He, however, sees the growing threat from "fundamentalist Islam" since the 1990s, whilst noting that, to date, "no shrines within Palestine have been destroyed as a result of Salafist ideology" (160-161). Therefore, it is difficult to understand why the author draws attention to this "lurking" problem rather than foregrounding the obvious obstacle of Israeli exclusion?

The book finishes on a strange note – arguing that "the most promising future for these shrines" (162) is one in which they are to be preserved as "historical documents" of what he calls "a diverse and more complex history of Muslim society than that which is presented by mainstream Sunni Islam" (162). So, the conclusion relates to a form of destruction that is barely indicated in the book.

As the author's introductory disclaimer signals, *Bones of Contention* focuses on the context for the creation of shrines, their architecture and history, rather than their use. Yet, it is impossible to fully comprehend the "architecture and history" of sacred sites without comprehending their contexts of practice and, in the Palestinian case, also their contexts of hegemonic practice. The "architectural" partition (by way of military check points and bullet-proof glass) of the "Tomb of the Patriarchs" in Al-Khalil/Hebron cannot be understood without the setting of the Israeli apartheid. However, in another introductory disclaimer, the reader is advised that Al-Khalil/Hebron and the Haram in Jerusalem will not be discussed, as they are not representative of medieval and Ottoman Palestine, as they have been considered extensively by other authors, but also because "their inclusion would tend to overshadow the many important issues surrounding the other shrines" (4).

There is much to appreciate about Petersen's book: he guides the reader through centuries of archival material, depicts the changing political climates in Palestine, details the architectural designs of shrines and explores the possibilities of their conservation. My review comes with the caveats of a (perhaps unfair) cross-disciplinary reading and the fact that Petersen's project is not an intentionally political one. Try as I might, as a social anthropologist I could not escape the fact that "descriptive" academic publications – be they historical, ethnographic, or else – *are* a political act. What is left unsaid or unaccentuated *also articulates* and the book would do better to firmly recognize and set out the research context (with its political), the methodological framework, and the author's own positionality.

To sum up, this is a clearly written, valuable contribution to the understanding of shrines in

Palestine. As an exercise in historiography, it does not falter. My (anthropological) reading reveals certain gaps, which the author might fill in during his next consideration of Palestinian Muslim shrines. The book offers much, yet its most valuable offerings are not explicitly framed. I warmly recommend this publication as a companion to undergraduate and postgraduate classes on religious and political histories, as well as to the wider public interested in Palestine and the interpretations of its sacral landscapes.

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